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FM AMEMBASSY BOGOTA
TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 7965
INFO AMEMBASSY CARACAS
AMEMBASSY QUITO
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AMEMBASSY LA PAZ
AMEMBASSY BRASILIA
AMEMBASSY PANAMA
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NSC WASHDC
JOINT STAFF WASHDC
SECDEF WASHDC
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BOGOTA 003159

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TAGS: PTER PHUM PINR SOCI CO

SUBJECT: FARC RESUMES ATTACKS AGAINST CIVILIAN POPULATION

CLASSIFIED BY AMBASSADOR ANNE W. PATTERSON, REASONS:
1.5 (B) AND (D).

¶1. (U) SUMMARY: FARC ACTIONS AGAINST THE MILITARY, THE CIVILIAN POPULATION, AND COLOMBIA'S INFRASTRUCTURE FLARED DURING A THREE-WEEK PERIOD FOLLOWING THE END OF THE DESPEJE. SINCE THEN, FARC ACTIVITY AGAINST THE POPULATION HAD BEEN MINIMAL, UNTIL THIS PAST WEEK: FROM MARCH 24 TO 27, FARC REBELS ATTACKED THE TOWN OF SARAVENA (ARAUCA DEPARTMENT) TWICE, DESTROYING SEVERAL GOC OFFICES. ON APRIL 5, INTERNATIONAL RED CROSS MEMBERS RECOVERED THE BODIES OF TWO POLICEMEN MURDERED BY THE FARC. ONE WAS THE FATHER OF ANDRES FELIPE PEREZ, THE 13-YEAR OLD CANCER PATIENT WHO DIED LAST DECEMBER, AFTER REPEATED PLEAS TO THE FARC TO RELEASE HIS FATHER. ON APRIL 6, FARC OPERATIVES EXPLODED TWO BOMBS IN A POPULAR NIGHT SPOT IN VILLAVICENCIO, KILLING 12 AND INJURING 100 OTHERS. EMBASSY CONTACTS ALSO REPORTED TWO BOMB EXPLOSIONS IN BOGOTA OVER THE WEEKEND, THE FIRST NEAR BOGOTA'S HEAVILY-USED TRANSMILENIO PUBLIC TRANSIT SYSTEM, AND THE SECOND AGAINST AN AUTO-REPAIR SHOP USED BY HIGH-LEVEL POLICE OFFICERS. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) ON MARCH 24, AN EXPLOSION IN SARAVENA (ARAUCA DEPARTMENT) CAUSED HEAVY DAMAGE TO THE OFFICES OF THE ATTORNEY GENERAL AND THE PROSECUTOR GENERAL. ALTHOUGH NO ONE WAS INJURED, NEARLY A BLOCK OF COMMERCIAL BUILDINGS IN DOWNTOWN SARAVENA WAS LEFT IN RUINS. LOCAL AUTHORITIES CONFIRMED THAT THE EXPLOSIVE DEVICE WAS PLANTED BY FARC REBELS. LESS THAN 48 HOURS LATER, ON MARCH 27, ANOTHER DEVICE WENT OFF, DESTROYING THE MAYOR'S OFFICE AND THE LOCAL POLICE STATION. TWO PEOPLE WERE INJURED IN THIS SECOND ATTACK. COLOMBIAN ARMY BOMB SQUADS WERE ABLE TO DEFUSE TWO MORE BOMBS THAT SET TO EXPLODE IN THE DOWNTOWN AREA.

¶3. (U) MEANWHILE, IN ANOTHER SAD CHAPTER TO THE SAGA OF ANDRES FELIPE PEREZ, ON APRIL 5, THE INTERNATIONAL RED CROSS RECOVERED THE BODIES OF TWO POLICE OFFICERS, BOTH MURDERED BY THE FARC. ONE OF THE BODIES WAS THAT OF CORPORAL JOSE NORBERTO PEREZ, KIDNAPPED BY THE FARC 27 MONTHS AGO, FROM RISARALDA DEPARTMENT. PEREZ WAS THE FATHER OF ANDRES FELIPE, A 13-YEAR-OLD BOY WHO DIED OF CANCER LAST DECEMBER, AFTER HAVING PLEADED WITH THE FARC TO RELEASE HIS FATHER SO THAT THE FAMILY COULD BE REUNITED BEFORE THE BOY'S DEATH. THE FARC REFUSED TO RELEASE PEREZ, CAUSING NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL OUTRAGE. THE SECOND BODY WAS IDENTIFIED AS POLICEMAN VICTOR MANUEL RUEDA, KIDNAPPED BY THE FARC FROM ANTIOQUIA DEPARTMENT IN AUGUST 1999. IN A STATEMENT TO THE PRESS, THE VICTIMS' FAMILIES SAID THAT THE TWO MEN HAD BEEN BROUGHT FROM THE JUNGLES OF SOUTHERN COLOMBIA TO ANTIOQUIA, WHERE THEY WERE SHOT IN THE BACK WHILE ATTEMPTING TO ESCAPE.

¶4. (U) ON APRIL 7, 12 PEOPLE, INCLUDING SIX MINORS, WERE KILLED AND AS MANY AS 100 OTHERS INJURED BY A FARC

"BOOBY-TRAP" BOMB DETONATED IN VILLAVICENCIO (META DEPARTMENT), SOME 50 MILES FROM BOGOTA. THE TWO-STAGE ATTACK TOOK PLACE IN THE "ZONA ROSA" DISTRICT OF THE CITY, KNOWN FOR ITS POPULAR BARS AND NIGHTCLUBS. AT APPROXIMATELY 1:00 A.M., A 20-KILOGRAM DEVICE EXPLODED, SHAKING THE NEIGHBORHOOD BUT CAUSING LITTLE INJURY OR DAMAGE. MANY IN THE AREA CAME OUTSIDE TO SEE WHAT HAD HAPPENED. ABOUT TEN MINUTES LATER, AFTER A CROWD HAD FORMED, AND AFTER THE ARRIVAL OF THE AUTHORITIES, FARC TERRORISTS DETONATED A SECOND DEVICE -- A CAR BOMB LOADED WITH 100 KILOGRAMS OF HIGH-POWER EXPLOSIVE. IN ADDITION TO THE DEATHS AND INJURIES, THE BLAST DESTROYED 15 VEHICLES, 30 HOUSES, AND THE HEADQUARTERS OF THE "SUPER RADIO" BROADCASTING COMPANY. PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE ALVARO URIBE VELEZ HAS CLAIMED THAT "SUPER RADIO" WAS THE TARGET OF THE ATTACK, FOR HAVING IGNORED FARC DEMANDS TO STOP BROADCASTING HIS CAMPAIGN ANNOUNCEMENTS. PRESIDENT PASTRANA CONDEMNED THE ATTACKS, SAYING THAT THERE WAS NO DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE TERRORIST BOMBINGS IN ISRAEL AND THOSE THAT TAKE PLACE IN COLOMBIA. PASTRANA REITERATED HIS REQUEST TO THE WORLD COMMUNITY TO HELP COLOMBIA COMBAT THE TERRORISTS.

15. (U) THE APRIL 7 CAR-BOMB IN VILLAVICENCIO WAS THE SECOND BOMBING INCIDENT IN THE DEPARTMENT IN TWO DAYS. ON APRIL 5, FARC GUERRILLAS DETONATED A BOMB ALONG THE VILLAVICENCIO-BOGOTA HIGHWAY, HALTING TRAFFIC FOR TEN HOURS. THE SAME DAY, FARC FORCES DETONATED A CAR BOMB IN THE COMMERCIAL DISTRICT OF THE SMALL TOWN OF FUENTE DE ORO, DAMAGING FOUR HOMES AND SEVERAL SMALL BUSINESSES. POLICE PREVENTED A LARGER TRAGEDY BY ORDERING THE EVACUATION OF PEOPLE LIVING IN THE AREA, AFTER DETECTING A SECOND CAR HEAVILY LOADED WITH EXPLOSIVES.

16. (U) THE FARC MAY ALSO BE INVOLVED IN THE RECENT MURDER OF A PRIEST IN NEIVA (HUILA DEPARTMENT). ON APRIL 7, TWO GUNMEN ENTERED A CHURCH IN NEIVA, AND SHOT AND KILLED PRIEST JUAN RAMON NUNEZ, WHILE HE WAS CONDUCTING MASS. NUNEZ DIED AT A LOCAL HOSPITAL. PRESS REPORTS SPECULATED THAT HE MIGHT HAVE BEEN TARGETED BECAUSE OF HIS PUBLIC DEMAND FOR THE FARC TO RELEASE A LOCAL KIDNAP VICTIM. ONE PARISHIONER WAS ALSO WOUNDED IN THE ATTACK. NUNEZ'S MURDER BRINGS TO 40 THE NUMBER OF PRIESTS MURDERED BY THE FARC AND ELN IN THE PAST TEN YEARS.

17. (U) EMBASSY ATF REPORTED TWO BOMB EXPLOSIONS IN DOWNTOWN BOGOTA ON APRIL 6. AT 8:20 P.M., A GRENADE EXPLODED AT A STATION OF BOGOTA'S POPULAR TRANSMILENIO PUBLIC TRANSIT SYSTEM. THE STATION AND THREE BUSES WERE DAMAGED. DIJIN (JUDICIAL AND INVESTIGATIVE POLICE DIRECTORATE) CONTACTS ADVISED THAT ALTHOUGH THE ATTACKER HAS NOT BEEN IDENTIFIED, FARC OPERATIVES ARE SUSPECTED, BASED ON AN ATTACK ON THE SAME STATION BY FARC FORCES ROUGHLY SIX WEEKS AGO. THE SECOND BLAST TOOK PLACE AT AROUND 8:30 P.M., AT AN AUTO-REPAIR SHOP USED BY THE COLOMBIAN NATIONAL POLICE. DIJIN SOURCES REPORTED THAT THE BOMB MAY HAVE BEEN PLACED BY FARC AGENTS, WHO HAD REPORTEDLY BEEN EXTORTING THE SHOP OWNER.

18. (C) COMMENT: IT IS UNCLEAR WHETHER THE CAR BOMBING IN VILLAVICENCIO REPRESENTS THE BEGINNING OF THE FARC'S ANTICIPATED ACTIONS IN ADVANCE OF THE MAY 26 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION. DURING THE PAST SIX WEEKS, THE COLMIL HAS MAINTAINED FAIRLY AGGRESSIVE OPERATIONS AGAINST FARC UNITS THROUGHOUT THE COUNTRY. ALSO, THE AIR FORCE CARRIED OUT PREEMPTIVE STRIKES AGAINST FARC MOBILE COLUMNS, WHICH PROBABLY HAS COMPLICATED GUERRILLA EFFORTS TO LAUNCH THEIR CAMPAIGN. AT THE SAME TIME, SENIOR COLMIL OFFICERS HAVE ACKNOWLEDGED THAT THEY ARE INCREASINGLY HARD PRESSED TO COVER KEY INFRASTRUCTURE TARGETS WHILE CONTINUING TO MAINTAIN OFFENSIVE OPERATIONS AGAINST THE GUERRILLAS. WITH THE ELECTIONS ON THE HORIZON, THE COLMIL WILL LIKELY BEGIN TO FOCUS THEIR EFFORTS ON A STRATEGY TO PROTECT POLLING PLACES AND VOTERS, A TASK THAT THEY FULFILLED WITH REMARKABLE SUCCESS FOR THE MARCH 10 CONGRESSIONAL ELECTIONS. DAO CONTACTS HAVE ADVISED THAT POLLING SECURITY EFFORTS WILL NOT DETRACT FROM "OPERATION TANATOS," THE COLMIL'S

ONGOING EFFORT TO RE-ESTABLISH GOVERNMENT CONTROL IN 19
DIFFERENT DEPARTMENTS.

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